

The Case of the Crooked Artist

There was an ugly light in the eyes of Mr. Felix Boyd when he stood surveying the scene of devastation.

"Professionals? Yes, Jimmie, he grimly answered, in response to a comment from the central office man. "Not ordinary professionals, but crooks of the very first water, cracksmen who know from A to Z the mechanical part of their business. In all my life, Jimmie, I never saw a villainous job more beautifully done."

"Nor I," growled Coleman, with a dubious shake of his head. "It's a piece of knavery to be proud of."

It was indeed a piece of knavery—a burglary that bluffed to the utmost efforts of police and detectives, and the mysterious features of which then appeared inexplicable even to Mr. Felix Boyd.

He was standing with a group of men at the rear of a deep, handsome store in Maiden Lane. It was the store of one of his numerous clients, Messrs. Kibby & Kane, dealers in art works and valuable porcelains, and importers and jobbers of all kinds of precious stones. So mysterious was the burglary committed there the previous night that a brief description of the store is imperative to an appreciation of the extraordinary crime.

It occupied the ground floor of a narrow brick building, and was entered by a single door situated between two moderately large display windows of plate glass. It appeared narrow, because of its great depth, some sixty feet, and partly because much of the lateral space was taken by two long counters mounted with show-cases, one at either side of the store.

Having windows only at the front and rear, the side walls being entirely flanked with elaborate glass cabinets, the interior was partly illumined by a single arc light, pendant from the middle of the ceiling. At the rear was an office, occupying some eighteen feet, and parted from the general store by a wire grating of brass, some six feet high. In this office stood the desks of the firm and clerks, also two large portable safes, so placed that they faced the front of the store, from the windows of which they could easily be seen.

The show-cases and wall cabinets were filled with a striking display of merchandise—rich falcene, oriental porcelain, priceless Satsuma, Nisei, and Raku, curious carvings of ivory, stone and precious metals, and pieces of the finest lacquer ware of Shunsho and Korin, stands of ancient arms, racks of Japanese and Turkish swords, and, in fact, an endless variety of valuable house ornaments.

The stock of precious stones, however, which were handled only uncut, the firm not being in the jewelry business, were kept by day and night in the two safes mentioned above.

About 9 o'clock one February morning both members of the firm, several of the store clerks, a policeman, and the central office man stood with Felix Boyd grimly regarding one of the safes—and the rupture of the door, while making the remarks above noted. The safe had been broken open, fairly rent asunder and had been robbed of its entire contents.

"Professionals—yes, Jimmie, most decidedly," reiterated Boyd. "Novices could not possibly have done such a job. It is the work of experts in the craft of safe-breaking."

"There appears to have been no explosive used," observed Coleman.

"A fact that accentuates the extraordinary character of the work," said Boyd.

"That's true, Felix."

"Notice this section of steel plate here on the floor. It was ripped from the face of the front door. It was drilled through around the combination, and the knob and plate were forced off with a steel wedge. Here is where the drill frame stood, where you see these metal shavings and all this oil upon the floor."

"No doubt about it, Felix."

"The plate was ripped off by means of a powerful gripper and a large jack screw. Notice where it tore away from the heavy hinges. Some of the bolt-heads here have been cut off and the bolts driven inward with a steel spindle. Evidently, the rascals attempted to make work the combination, for the lock bolts appear to have been thrown with steel bars, or Jimmies, with a tremendous leverage."

"It was a big job, surely," remarked the central office man.

"It was a job that could have been done only by master mechanics, Jimmie, provided with the very best of tools adapted to the work. Their aim was to do the job without much noise, hence no explosive was used."

"It must have taken the scoundrels some time, Felix, to have forced a safe the size of this."

"Several hours, Jimmie, at least."

And Felix Boyd arose from a closer inspection of the ruptured safe, as well as the steel plates mentioned, lay scattered upon the oil-stained floor, with numerous bits of iron bolts and heaps of metal shavings dropped by the drills.

None of the tools used by the burglars had been left behind, however, not even a battered wedge or blunted drill. As if bent upon removing every clue to their identity, the rascals had thoroughly cleaned their traps—as thoroughly as they cleaned out the safe of nearly thirty thousand dollars' worth of loose diamonds and other precious gems.

The senior member of the firm, both of whom were dismally viewing the scene, took up Boyd's last remark.

"Several hours," he exclaimed incredulously. "I don't see how that can be possible, Mr. Boyd."

"This work cannot possibly have been done in less time, Mr. Kibby."

"But this officer positively states that, while passing in front of the store on his beat during last night, he several times looked in here, and saw the safe as usual."

"It makes no difference what Officer Dolan states," rejoined Boyd, in tones of mingled impatience and perplexity. "This work speaks for itself."

"But our private watchman also is—"

"It's all one and the same, Kibby! Regardless of what any man, woman or child might say, this break cannot have been committed in less than half the night. That is too obvious to permit contradiction. Who is your private watchman, Mr. Kibby?"

"A man named Green. I have sent for him to come down here."

"Sent where?"

"To his home. He goes off duty at six in the morning."

"Stop a bit. What are Green's duties?"

"He is mutually employed by several large concerns in this locality," explained Kibby. "He has no key to any of the stores, but he is hired to go from one to the other at brief intervals during the night, and peer through

On the Trail of "Big Finger"

the front windows to see that nothing is wrong."

"Merely an addition to the police service," said Boyd.

"That's it," nodded Kibby. "Our arc light in the middle of the store yonder is kept burning all night, and the entire interior, including the office and both of these safes, may be plainly seen from outside the front windows. Green must have looked in here a score of times last night, at least, and he is a thoroughly trustworthy man. Mr. Boyd and one who—Ah! here is the man himself."

Boyd swung round to meet him, a sturdy, middle-aged man, who had served in the Civil war, and who, as he approached the immediate scene of the burglary, stared with wide, astonished eyes at the fractured safe.

"Good heavens!" he gasped, nonplussed. "When—when was that done?"

"Last night," said Boyd, curtly.

"Impossible! It would have taken half the night."

"That's very true, my man."

"But I swear that I saw the safe standing here as usual twenty times during the night," cried Green, with fervor evincing his honesty. "I came to the front window yonder every half-hour during the night, and looked in here. This job must have been done since about 1 o'clock, Mr. Kibby, when I went home."

"But now it is only nine, Mr. Green, which gives but three hours for a job which, upon your own words, must have required half the night," remarked Boyd dryly. "Evidently there is a mystery here not easily to be solved. Who discovered the burglary, Mr. Kibby?"

"Our janitor, Mr. Black, who opens the store each morning."

"I am the man, sir."

"Ah, yes. And at what time did you arrive here this morning, Mr. Black?"

"About 7 o'clock, sir, as usual."

"And then?"

"I did not notice anything wrong until I walked out this way," said Black. "Then I saw what had been done, sir, and I telephoned to the members of the firm."

"We both were here before 8, Mr. Boyd, and at once notified you and Coleman," interposed Mr. Kibby. "Coleman arrived just before you did, and the evidence here remains just as we found it. If anything is to be done, Mr. Boyd, it strikes me that it should be done at once."

Boyd did not fancy the last, as his response indicated.

"I have some suggestions to make, Kibby, as to what should be done," he deliberately asked.

"Why, no, not if you—"

"Then kindly let me do my work in my own way," Boyd coolly interrupted him. "I am as sure as you that this robbery here has been committed, for your firm is included among my clients, and my reputation is seriously threatened. Take my word for it, Kibby, I shall find the tools used to get down these burglars and recover your property."

"I haven't the least doubt of that, Mr. Boyd," cried Kibby heartily.

"Then let me proceed in my own way. I shall waste no time, I assure you. Now, Dolan, how many times did you pass the front of this store last night?"

"More than a dozen times, sir," replied the policeman. "It's on my regular night beat."

"Did you glance in here each time you passed the windows?"

"I did more, sir. I stopped short, and looked in."

"Was the arc light in the middle of the store burning?"

"It was, sir, the same as usual."

"And you noticed the office and both of these safes?"

"I did, sir, every time I looked in here."

"Yet you saw nothing wrong?" demanded Boyd perplexedly.

"Divil a thing out of the way," cried Dolan roundly. "I'd have sworn, barring what I now see, that neither safe was touched during the night."

Boyd's brows were knitting closer over his searching gray eyes. He stood silent for a moment, then added:

"Did you see any persons in the front street, or in this locality whose actions appeared suspicious?"

"I did not. The only man I saw was the extra watchman, Mr. Green."

"What are your hours of duty about here?"

"I was on my regular beat from 8 last night till 6 this morning."

"That's all, Dolan," said Boyd curtly. "You may go. Clear this part of the store, Kibby, and set your clerks to work as usual. I want none of them in my way while I'm looking into the case. Stop a bit, Kibby! What are these two poles?"

Despite the prevailing excitement over the mysteriously executed crime, every hearer was startled by the sudden sharp ring of Boyd's voice, by his quick change of countenance and the intensified gleam of his dilated eyes. They had lighted upon two long wooden poles, each with a small metal crook at one end, which were standing back of the counter at each side of the store.

"These poles?" queried Kibby, halting.

"They are used for lowering the windows at the top."

"The windows?" snapped Boyd, as if electrified by some startling conjecture. "Why, then, are they so far from the windows? Are they usually kept here in the middle of the store?"

"Well, no, they are not," replied Kibby. "One of them generally stands in the corner of the office yonder, and the other near the front door. Do any of your clerks know how they came here?"

Several of the young men near by replied in the negative, but Boyd did not appear to hear them. He stood staring up at the ceiling, his eyes aglow and his lips hard pressed.

Presently he fell back a few steps and leaned against one of the show-cases, gazing, as if absently, at the floor. He discovered, not precisely what he sought, but something which had escaped the notice of all others.

About two feet in front of the brass grating, outside of which he then was standing, was a succession of tiny holes in the floor, as if made with an awl or with tacks. There were not more than half-a-dozen of these barely discernible punctures in the hard wood, yet Boyd quickly noticed that they ran directly across the floor, from counter to counter.

Though his thin, firm lips did not relax much, a faint smile played about them for a moment, and he turned to Kibby and said, with curious indifference:

"Excuse me, Kibby. I didn't hear what you said about those window poles."

"Said—"

"Ah, well, it doesn't matter," Boyd lightly interrupted. "Set things going here as usual, Kibby, and leave this case to me. It looks hopeless enough just now, but I will get after the rascals. They entered by one of the rear

basement windows, I think you said. Down by yonder door, eh? Come with me, Jimmie. We'll see what the basement offers."

Closely followed by the central office man, Boyd strode across the office and through a rear door leading to the basement.

It is not at all to Coleman's discredit that he was completely mystified by the extraordinary burglary. He knew that Dolan was honest, and Green presumably so, yet it appeared as if both men must have been blind the previous night, or they could not have failed to see the men at work upon the rified safe—a job covering several hours, requiring at least three powerful men, and all within thirty feet of a strong arc light.

Though mystified, indeed, by the burglary, the central office man was not blind to one fact unobserved by others. He saw that Felix Boyd, whose every curious change he had learned to read aright, was laboring under an unusual stress of subdued excitement. When he reached the basement, where none could observe them, and Boyd threw off his self-restraint.

He swung round at the foot of the stairs, then cried quickly, under his breath:

"Baffled by it, eh? No wonder, Jimmie. So was I at first. But now I—"

He checked himself, glancing swiftly about, and Coleman excitedly whispered:

"You've discovered something?"

"Don't ask me—not now, not yet, Jimmie! I've discovered—yes, one fact, surely."

"Tell me."

"We're up against him once more—for the last time, God willing. He's at work again."

"Not Scanton! Not the Big Finger!" gasped Coleman, with every nerve electrified.

"The same—our old foe!" Boyd fiercely muttered. "The crime itself betrays him. No less craftily a knave could have designed it, no less capable a scoundrel could have executed it. It's Scanton's work, Jimmie. I'll wager my life on that. The question is, can we land him?"

That he was bent upon the latter, bent upon it with all the energy he possessed, appeared in Boyd's strained, nervous tension. Without awaiting reply, he hurriedly left the stairs and began his investigations in the basement.

Coleman now saw plainly the true cause of his companion's unusual excitement. It was many months since Magnus Scanton, the notorious Big Finger, with a death sentence hanging over him, had escaped from custody. From that day, however, Boyd had been watching for him, never doubting that sooner or later he would resume his felonious work; and it was businatural that the possibility of again locating and arresting this archcriminal against whose rare and unusual accomplishments his own skill long had been opposed, should have stirred Boyd deeply.

The cellar was but dimly lighted, and was half filled with empty packing cases and accumulated rubbish. Boyd's immediate interest, however, was claimed by one of the windows, which had been entirely removed, as well as the iron grating outside.

"Fried out with a jimmy," he muttered. "Here are the indentures it made in the casting. Though they removed all their tools, probably to be used elsewhere, the rascals did not delay to cover their tracks."

"It may have been near morning," said Coleman. "It's not light, you know, until nearly six."

Boyd did not appear to hear him.

"Hut there were three of them, Jimmie," he cried. "Not the shoeprints left in the clay outside. One narrow, two broad, but of different lengths. They were so well defined that a plaster cast of them might be taken. The clay had not frozen when they were made, but now it's as hard as a brick. It grew cold soon after midnight, Jimmie, and they must have entered just before."

While speaking Boyd climbed through the window into a small rear yard, where the central office man quickly joined him. Leaning against the brick wall stood the iron grating which the burglars had ripped from the casing. To this Boyd paid no attention, but at once darted to the gate of a high wooden fence dividing the yard from a narrow alley.

"Yes!" he ejaculated. "Just as I thought. This alley leads into yonder narrow court, and that into Maiden Lane. The dogs did not even secure this gate after them."

Here are some footprints in the alley, Felix."

"Stop a bit!" cried Boyd. By heaven, here's a new one! There were four, Jimmie, instead of three. Hold on! Wait! There is something strange here! Wait till I examine them!"

The energy and movements of Felix Boyd at such times might be likened to those of a hound seeking a lost scent. For several minutes he darted to and fro in the narrow alley, crouching at times, dropping even to his hands and knees, and all the while studying, as if his life depended upon the result, a succession of footprints covering a rod or more of frozen ground.

Several minutes passed before Coleman ventured to growl to Boyd:

"Why the dickens are there so many prints on both sides of the gate? I'm blessed if I can fathom that."

Still crouching upon the ground, Boyd looked up at him with feverishly brilliant eyes.

"Stir your wits, Jimmie!" he cried softly. "These footprints were made by the fourth man while his confederates were doing the job. He was on the watch out here, to give warning in case of danger. Here is where he walked to and fro, passing from one side of the gate to the other, constantly watching yonder court, and all the while thus exercising to overcome the chill of the night air."

"By Jove! I believe you are right."

"I know I am right."

"But look! Look here!" cried Coleman, suddenly dropping to the ground. "There must have been two of them to watch out here."

"Why so, Jimmie?"

"Here are two footprints not in the least alike. Note them all along the alley. One is of ordinary size, but the other is short and stubby."

"True."

"Then there must have been at least two sentinels here. These impressions plainly show that there were two men here on guard."

To Coleman's intense surprise, Felix Boyd quickly rejoined:

"You're wrong, Jimmie. These impressions show that there was but one sentinel. They plainly show that—and very much more than that!"

Boyd's exultant voice, even more than his unexpected words, sent a thrill through the central office man.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed. "What do you mean, Felix?"

"This Jimmie," cried Boyd, scarce above his breath, "is the man that every impression of ordinary size was made by a boot worn on the right foot. That is obvious from the shape of the sole. In no place can you find a corresponding impression of a left boot. Now note these smaller, stubby impressions, Jimmie. Invariably it is that of a left boot. No sign of a similar right one. Note, too, how much deeper is this stubby impression than the other. These two footprints were made by the same man, Jimmie—a man with a normal, well-formed right foot and a clubbed left."

Coleman leaped up, with face transfixed.

"A club-footed man! Oh, by heaven, here's a clue worth having!" he exclaimed excitedly. "Felix, you're a wonder, a—"

"Steady, Jimmie, steady," continued Boyd, rising. "We must be cautious. I'm sure we are not seen; let's be also sure we are not overheard. Slip away, Jimmie, and get me some plaster of Paris and water."

"I can get both within a block."

"Do so, Jimmie. I will take a plaster cast of both of these impressions. That's the game, eh? First the feet of the man, and then the man himself!"

While awaiting Coleman's return, Boyd reentered the cellar, and continued his investigations, but he found there nothing that added to the shrewd discoveries already made.

To take plaster casts of the two odd footprints in the alley required but a short time, and, having wrapped them in a paper found in the cellar, Boyd did the way upstairs and through the store, from the front door of which they emerged into Maiden Lane.

"Kibby was right," observed Coleman pausing outside to gaze through the plate-glass windows. "The office and safes, for all they are forty feet away, are easily seen. Even more so at night, with the arc light burning. It strikes me that those two watchmen must have seen something."

"They thought they saw the safe—didn't they?" said Boyd, oddly.

Coleman looked perplexed, and Boyd got in the way of any question by adding quickly:

"There's one other place I must visit, Jimmie. I want a look at the room above Kibby's front door. We'll step up and see who occupies it."

It proved to be a tailoring establishment, and Boyd was readily granted permission to look about the room. He confined his investigation to the carpet near the front window, however, which directly above the door of Kibby's store.

With the help of a lens, Boyd discovered considerable dirt, evidently from a pair of soiled boots, and also something even more to the purpose. As he rose from his knees on the carpet, he indifferently inquired of the proprietor:

"Did you detect any odor of tobacco

smoke, Mr. Gale, when you opened your rooms this morning?"

"Well, well, that's odd," laughed the man. "What have you found on the floor? My first thought was that somebody had been smoking a pipe here."

"Which I think hit the nail on the head, Mr. Gale," smiled Boyd, as he and Coleman withdrew.

"What did you find there?" queried the latter.

"Some droppings of rolled plug, Jimmie, where confederate number five stood filling his pipe."

"Confederate number five and sentinel number two, eh?"

"Exactly, Jimmie," said Boyd. "Admission to that room evidently was obtained with a skeleton key. Standing there in the darkness, the rascal could gaze down upon the street and sidewalk, and notice the approach of either Dolan or Green. A sharp rap upon the floor, say with a cane, would have been heard by the knaves in the store below, and warn them to cease work until the officers departed."

"Pins as two and two," growled Coleman. "Then you think—"

"I think that we at present want most of all—the man with the club-foot!" Boyd curtly interrupted. "Drop those casts in my office as you pass, Jimmie. I have business elsewhere, old chap, and will see you later."

The two men parted at the corner of Nassau street. Coleman heading for his office in Pine street and the latter hastening away on a mission of his own, the nature of which his devoted friend of the central office could by no racking of his brains and wits conjecture.

Coleman was even more mystified when, at the end of five days, he had not again laid eyes upon Felix Boyd. Nor did he see him till the afternoon of the sixth day, while seated with Boyd's clerk in the latter's office. Then, when close upon 6 o'clock and growing dark outside, the door was abruptly opened and Boyd entered with a strange outline.

He was roughly clad, with a woollen cap drawn well over his brow, and he carried in his hand a disguise removed when he left the street. Though his thin features appeared strangely drawn and haggard, as if from sleeplessness or a protracted mental strain, his eyes never were brighter, and he laughed lightly at the glad cries that broke impulsively from both Coleman and Terry Gowen.

"Ah, Jimmie, not expecting me, eh?" he cried. "Hello, Terry, my boy! I'm quite a stranger here."

"Well, I should say so!" cried the clerk. "Nearly six whole days."

"Where in thunder have you been, Felix?"

"Burrowing underground, like a mole," laughed Boyd. "You know the Big Finger, Jimmie, and the watch he invariably keeps upon me and my office when perpetrating one of his rascally jobs. I have been giving him no chance to locate me, and I now have reason to believe that he thinks me out of town."

"So that has been your game, eh?"

"Rather! I sneaked in here after dark, Jimmie, hoping to find you. If

you have nothing on for— Oh, by the way, I suppose you still have got those plaster casts of the clubbed foot, eh?"

"Yes, surely!" exclaimed Coleman.

"Well, Jimmie, I have got the man himself," cried Boyd dryly. "And if you have nothing on for tonight, old chap, I will show you something worth seeing."

Coleman threw up both hands, and sprang to his feet.

"I'd defer my wedding," he cried, "to go with you!"

"Good enough," said Boyd, laughing. "See, too, that you have your guns! We may need them."

III.

The city clocks were on the stroke of 8, a murky, unseasonable warm and musty night, with not a star to relieve the ebon gloom of the silent heavens. Yet far above the city there hung on the dead mist, like a vast yellow halo, mocking the vice and corruption below, the reflection of a myriad of street lamps and glaring electric lights.

The mission upon which Felix Boyd had invited the central office man, however, took them out of the throbbing heart of the city, and to one of the less thickly settled nothern outskirts.

Through several unpaved streets, by a devious route across vacant lots and through deserted alleys, Boyd led his companion to the rear yard of a somewhat isolated stable, the grim outline of which rose in dark and threatening relief against the lighter street on which it fronted.

"Now with greater caution, Jimmie," he softly whispered, while quietly slipping to one side a loose board in the rear wall. "No light indicates that my man has yet arrived, but he will soon show up. I have planned to get here first. Screw yourself in through here, Jimmie, then give me your hand. You'll need a guide, old chap."

When both had wormed their way through the opening made, Boyd quietly replaced the board. Then, groping in the intense gloom till he found Coleman's hand, he led him with slow steps back of several vacant stalls across the stable floor and up an incline for running vehicles to the second story. He did not stop, however, until he had reached the third floor, a commodious loft, where, between some bales of hay near the head of the stairs, was a concealment to which Felix Boyd was by no means a stranger.

Yet they barely had reached the place when a sound from below caused Boyd to whisper quickly:

"Not a breath, Jimmie! He has come earlier than usual. There's something new in the wind, something of which I am ignorant."

"I'll not breathe, even," murmured Coleman. "But if anything has escaped you, Felix Boyd, I'll throw up my commission."

The last was barely audible. From below were sounding the irregular steps of a lame man, stumbling slowly up the incline, then up the stairs, while the light from a lantern he carried heralded his approach. Upon reaching the loft, however, he set down the lantern and switched on an electric light, which brightly illumined the entire place.

Coleman, upon beholding from his

concealment the scene presented, felt his blood move faster.

The new arrival was a slender, dark-skinned man, of 30, neatly clad and evidently of foreign extraction. One of his legs was a trifle shorter than the other, and the foot deformed, causing a peculiar stumping gait. He at once moved toward the middle of the loft, and halted in front of the object which chiefly had claimed Coleman's interest.

At first sight it appeared to be a piece of scenery, fastened to an upright frame some ten feet high and twelve feet in width. Upon longer inspection, however, it was more like a huge, curious picture. Yet it had no border space. The objects depicted terminated at the end of the canvas, as if such it was, both at the top and bottom, as well as the sides, the they were very clearly defined, and the perspective strikingly perfect.

As well as Coleman could judge, it was intended to represent the back wall and a portion of the rear interior of some store or office. The longer he looked at it, moreover, the more strongly he was impressed with the idea that he was gazing straight into the back of a business concern.

At one side of the large frame was a square wooden table on which were numerous pots of paints and brushes, while near by was a platform on wheels by which the high portions of the canvas might easily be reached by the painter. Several wooden chairs stood near the table.

For several minutes the cripple, watched constantly by the two concealed men, studied the picture from one position and another, then approached and laid his palm upon the surface of it. He scarce had done so when hurried steps sounded from below, and presently a sturdy, middle-aged man, coarsely clad, and far from prepossessing, mounted the stairs.

"Aha!" he cried, by way of greeting. "So you're here, Julian Zampa. I saw that the lantern was gone, so I hastened to join you."

"Very good, Mr. Denny," replied the other, with a slightly foreign accent. "I'm glad you came. I saw the lantern was gone, so I hastened to join you."

"Perfectly."

"That's lucky. It's got to come down tonight."

"Tonight?"

"Ah, be used tomorrow night."

"You amaze me, Denny," cried Zampa. "Used tomorrow night?"

Denny, who was the owner of the stable, laughed loudly.

"That's what!" he cried. "I didn't know it myself until noon today. Oh, it's really too rich, Zampa, the job that Scanton now has framed up."

"Tell me," cried Zampa curiously. "What new scheme has been devised?"

Denny again laughed loudly, and pointed to the picture.

"You know Polinski," said he. "Or you should, Zampa, since you've painted this picture of his shop."

"I know but little of him," was the reply. "I have been in his shop only once, to secretly get the measurements for this work. My sketches for the

Continued on Page 9.

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